

IRV Gives Election Results ASAP

It's not often that Memphis has the chance to be a trend setter, but one of the least understood proposals before the Memphis Charter Commission would give us just such a chance.

It's Instant Runoff Voting, a proposal submitted to the Commission by Shelby County Commissioner Steve Mulroy, whose solidly liberal credentials should allay concerns that IRV is a plot to give white voters more clout at the polls.

He'd be hard-pressed to have more graphic examples of the wisdom of IRV than this year's city elections. After all, it's likely that a number of City Council races will require costly runoff elections, where voters will back into selecting a winner rather than voting for their hopes and dreams for the future.

Eliminating Spoilers

Sadly, there's no runoff for the Memphis mayor and Council super-districts, meaning that there's the real prospect that some elected officials – notably the mayor – will take office with more people voting against the winner than in favor of him or her.

For the sake of example, consider the race for District 6 Council race where yet another Ford progeny, Edmund Ford Jr., is running for the seat left open by his father in the wake of his federal indictment. His major opponents are Reginald Milton, Ed Vaughn, James Catchings and a few assorted others.

It's likely that no candidate will get a majority of the vote, and as a result, a follow-up runoff costing Memphis taxpayers tens of thousands of dollars will be held. There's also the prospect that the turnout will be much smaller.

Cheaper And Immediate

It could be different. It could be cheaper, more efficient and the results could be immediate.

That's the beauty of Instant Runoff Voting. Memphis voters would no longer have to vote twice to get a winner, because on election night, a majority winner would be proclaimed.

Here's how it works:

When voters go to the polls, they vote for candidates in order of their preference. They pick their first choice, their second choice, their third choice, and so on.

Simple Math

If a candidate wins a majority, that person obviously is the winner. If there is no candidate with a majority, the rankings of the other candidates are used to declare a winner.

All ballots are recounted, and the candidate receiving the least number of first place votes is eliminated. The ballots are counted again, and voters who chose the eliminated candidate now have their votes counted for the second-ranked candidate. The weakest candidates are progressively eliminated and votes redistributed until a single candidate has a majority of the votes.

In this way, IRV offers the chance for better voter choice and wider voter participation in selecting the winner. According to proponents like Commissioner Mulroy, IRV allows voters to vote for their favorite candidate without the fear that they are helping to elect their least favorite candidate. Best of all, the ultimate winner actually has the real support of a majority of voters.

No Longer A Novelty

For four years, San Francisco has been using IRV, and the response from the public has been highly supportive. Soon, Oakland and Minneapolis will add the instant runoff to its election process after voters overwhelmingly approved it at referendum.

North Carolina is beginning to use it in certain judicial races, and Arkansas, South Carolina and Louisiana use the ranked ballot for overseas and military voters. Meanwhile, Ireland uses it in its president's election, London in its mayor's election and Australia for its House of Representatives.

Support of IRV has also come from one of the most unexpected places – political parties. With instant runoffs, parties can choose to nominate multiple candidates without worrying about watering down their voter support.

More Than Saving Money

Now, the liberal vote can be split between multiple candidates, allowing a conservative candidate to win. But IRV allows voters to rank all of their candidates so that if a district's dominant political philosophy does not fall victim to spoilers in the race who pull away enough votes from one major candidate to elect the other.

For example, in New Mexico, Green Party and Democratic Party candidates split liberal voters, allowing Republicans to be elected in districts in which they clearly are out of step.

Until Shelby County passes a vote-by-mail system, Instant Runoff Voting is the best idea to come along in years, because not only does it save significant public money, it has actually been credited with reducing negative campaigning. Because candidates aren't just campaigning for people's votes, but also for second and third rankings, which means that they are less likely to vilify opponents whose supporters can mean the difference between victory or defeat.

A Blow For Progressive Government

No part of American society is more resistant to change than the public sector, but the Charter Commission has the opportunity to strike a blow for innovation in our election process. One Commission member says IRV is too complicated for Memphis voters, a pretty damning statement considering that all it does it require voters to rank candidates 1-2-3.

So far, some of the Memphis Charter Commission members seem a bit perplexed by IRV, and a couple have said that it's not easy to explain. Then again, neither is the electoral college.

Here's hoping that the Commissioner will give Instant Runoff Voting the serious consideration that it deserves. It would be good if Memphis could be known for its commitment to progressive policies for a change.

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